

GULF OF MEXICO GROUPER MANAGEMENT IN FEDERAL WATERS

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

February 2008



Which species of grouper are managed in the Gulf of Mexico?

- The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (Gulf Council) and NOAA Fisheries Service regulate the harvest of 15 grouper species:
 - Red, gag, black, scamp, yellowfin, yellowmouth, rock hind, and red hind grouper comprise the shallow-water grouper complex
 - Snowy, yellowedge, speckled hind, warsaw, and misty grouper comprise the deep-water grouper complex
 - Nassau and goliath grouper are managed as single species and are prohibited from being harvested

What management measures have the Gulf Council and NOAA Fisheries Service implemented since 2004 to end overfishing of grouper?

- In July 2004, NOAA Fisheries Service implemented regulations intended to reduce red grouper harvest by 9.4 percent. These regulations included:
 - Commercial
 - 5.31 million pound (MP) gutted weight *red grouper* quota
 - 8.80 MP gutted weight *shallow-water grouper* quota
 - Provision requiring the entire *shallow-water grouper* fishery be closed when either the *red grouper* or *shallow water grouper* quota is reached
 - Recreational
 - 1.25 MP gutted weight recreational target catch level
 - Two-fish red grouper bag limit within the aggregate five-fish grouper bag limit
- In August 2005, NOAA Fisheries Service implemented an interim rule requested by the Gulf Council to reduce recreational red grouper harvest in 2005 because recreational red grouper landings exceeded the annual target catch level in both 2003 and 2004. Recreational red grouper landings in 2003 totaled 1.3 million pounds. Recreational red grouper landings in 2004 totaled 3.0 million pounds.
 - The interim rule temporarily reduced the red grouper bag limit from 2 fish to 1 fish per person per day, and prohibited the harvest of red grouper from November 1 to December 31, 2005

- July 2006, NOAA Fisheries Service replaced interim regulations with new regulations proposed by the Gulf Council through a regulatory amendment
 - New regulations included a recreational bag limit of one red grouper per person per day and a rule prohibiting the captain and crew of for-hire vessels from retaining the bag limit of any grouper while under charter
- In November 2006, NOAA Fisheries Service implemented the one-month recreational seasonal closure after the 2006 gag assessment confirmed the gag population was undergoing overfishing

How are commercial grouper fisheries managed in the Gulf of Mexico?

- A prohibition on shallow-water grouper after the fishery lands either 8.8 million pounds gutted weight of shallow-water grouper species combined or 5.31 million pounds gutted weight of red grouper each year
 - In 2004, the shallow-water and red grouper fisheries closed on November 15
 - In 2005, the shallow-water and red grouper fisheries closed on October 10
 - In 2006 and 2007, the shallow-water and red grouper fisheries did not close
- A prohibition on deep-water grouper after the fishery lands 1.02 million pounds gutted weight of deep-water grouper species combined each year
 - In 2004, the commercial deep-water grouper fishery closed on July 15
 - In 2005, the commercial deep-water grouper fishery closed on June 23
 - In 2006, the commercial deep-water grouper fishery closed on June 27
 - In 2007, the commercial deep-water grouper fishery closed on June 2
- Minimum size limits for black grouper, gag, red grouper, yellowfin grouper, and scamp
- A 6,000-pound gutted weight trip limit for all deep-water and shallow-water grouper species combined
- Various gear restrictions
- A seasonal closure for gag, red grouper, and black grouper, which occurs from February 15 to March 15 each year

How are recreational grouper fisheries managed in the Gulf of Mexico?

- An annual red grouper target catch level of 1.25 million pounds gutted weight
- A one red grouper bag limit
- A five grouper aggregate bag limit
- Minimum size limits for black grouper, red grouper, gag, yellowfin grouper, and scamp
- A zero grouper bag limit for for-hire captain and crew while under charter
- A prohibition on the harvest of Nassau grouper and goliath grouper
- A one-fish per vessel possession limit for speckled hind and warsaw grouper
- A seasonal closure for gag, red grouper, and black grouper, which occurs from February 15 to March 15 each year

What is the current status of Gulf of Mexico grouper populations?

- The status of only three grouper species (red grouper, gag, and goliath grouper) is known:
 - Red grouper is near its optimal level
 - Gag is undergoing overfishing, which means the fishery is harvesting gag at a rate that compromises the fishery's ability to produce the maximum amount of fish over time
 - Goliath grouper is rebuilding
- The status of the remaining grouper species is unknown

How is the status of grouper populations determined?

- The status of grouper and other federally managed fisheries in the Southeastern United States is periodically evaluated through the Southeast Data, Assessment, and Review (SEDAR) process
- The SEDAR process was initiated in 2002 to improve the quality and reliability of fisheries population assessments and emphasizes constituent and stakeholder participation in assessment development
- The SEDAR process involves fishermen, scientists, environmental interests, and managers in three separate week-long, public workshops:
 - The first is a data workshop, where participant review all available data and make consensus determinations about which data constitute the best scientific information available on the fishery, and how they should be used in the assessment
 - The second is an assessment workshop, where data are evaluated in models to determine the status of the population
 - The third is a review workshop, where independent scientific experts review the assessment and make a determination about the adequacy of the data and assessment methodology
- The Gulf Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee also reviews final SEDAR reports and supporting information, and makes a determination supporting or opposing assessment methodologies and findings. This Committee is composed of economists, biologists, sociologists who are knowledgeable about the technical aspects of Gulf of Mexico fisheries
- For more information about the SEDAR process visit:
<http://www.sefsc.noaa.gov/sedar/>

If gag fishing rates are too high, then why are fishermen reportedly seeing so many gag in the water?

- The peer-reviewed, SEDAR assessment supports the observation that the gag population increased in size from the mid-1990s through 2004. During this time, gag catches also increased, resulting in high fishing mortality rates
- That assessment attributes this population size increase to higher than average reproduction rates since the early 1990s
- Current fishing mortality rates and harvest levels can not be sustained if higher than average reproduction rates do not persist over the long term

What are the main regulatory changes the Gulf Council is currently considering to end overfishing of gag and to respond to new information indicating the red grouper population is near the target level?

- Specifying an interim commercial/recreational allocation of gag and red grouper based on the average landings of each sector from 1986 through 2005
- Reducing both the commercial and recreational gag catch quotas by 45 percent
- Allowing each recreational fisherman, except for-hire captain and crew, to retain three grouper per day, one of which could be gag
- Extending the recreational seasonal closure from January 15 through April 15 each year
- Requiring all federally-permitted vessels to comply with the more restrictive of state or federal regulations when fishing in state waters

What is the status of these potential regulatory changes?

- The Gulf Council approved the draft proposed regulatory changes for public hearings when it met the week of January 28 in St. Petersburg, Florida
- Public hearings are scheduled in March 2008. For more information on upcoming public hearings visit: <http://www.gulfcouncil.org/Beta/GMFMCWeb/prrel/pr%202008-03.pdf>
- The Gulf Council is scheduled to review public comments on the proposal when it meets again in April and to approve the proposal for Secretarial review and approval at that time
- Even if the Gulf Council submits the proposal for Secretarial review in April, the public will have additional opportunities to comment on the proposal and implementing regulations during the Secretarial review process

How can I participate in grouper management?

- For more information about current regulations and opportunities to become involved in the Council process, visit: www.gulfcouncil.org

